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A FIRST COURSE IN SPANISH CONVERSATION IN COLLEGE

By CARLOS CASTILLO

Assuming the advisability or even perhaps the imperative need of having a class in college devoted entirely to conversation in Spanish, what should be the scope of this class, its relation to other language classes in the curriculum, and what is the most efficient method of producing results? These questions will be discussed below in the light of the writer's own experience.

Object. Is it the immediate purpose of a class with a limited time, meeting, say, four times a week for twelve weeks or three times a week for eighteen weeks, to acquire fluency? Can a rather heterogeneous group of students be expected to speak the Spanish language fluently at the end of a semester?

Evidently, no. It seems wiser to bend our efforts toward securing accuracy rather than fluency, scrupulous correctness of expression rather than garrulity. Many a student is found with what I should call a *fatal facility* in speaking the language, which, if unchecked from the very outset, becomes unmanageable and demoralizing. Such a specimen of student is indeed not rare in a conversation class, and it should be the painful duty of the teacher to discipline his enthusiasm, as it will be suggested through this article.

Owing perhaps to lack of time in our college elementary courses, oral practice and phonetic drill are reduced to the minimum and are often encroached upon by the other requirements of the course, such as reading, translating, and the various types of drills demanded by the grammar and the composition book. Whether this method is the best to prepare our American students or not, is outside of our present discussion, but the fact nevertheless remains that it is the one generally followed both in high schools and colleges. Let us assume for our purpose that a student has had the usual first year of Spanish, consisting, perhaps, of the elements of grammar, a reader, a first composition book, and some 200 pages of easy prose in addition. Our task in the

conversation class will be, first, to train the ear, second, to enlarge the student's active vocabulary, and third, to enrich his fund of idioms.

To train the ear. This is partly accomplished by the daily dictation, which may consist at first of isolated words. The following are suggested: those with the same spelling but of different accentuation, as, *numeró*, *numero*, *número*; *terminó*, *termino*, *término*; or those in which a diphthong is found contrasted with the same or similar word without the diphthong, as, *venia*, and *venta*; *gloria* and *gloría*; *varia* and *varía*; words where a semi-consonantal element is likely to puzzle the ear, such as *hielo*, *huevo*, *fuego*, *habituado*, or words with striking assimilations, as *conquistar*, *fingir*, *pongo*, *enviar*; pairs of words in which the single *r* sound is contrasted with that of the double *r*, *pero* and *perro*; *caro* and *carro*; *hierro* and *hierro*; words containing the two sounds, as *carrera*, *herrero*; and finally certain pairs of words which are often mistaken for each other, as *cara* and *cada*; *modo* and *moro*; *coro* and *codo*. No attempt has been made in the foregoing to exhaust the material in regard to dictating isolated words; the idea has been to point out the greater advantage of selecting words with a certain purpose in mind over the practice of dictating words at random. One could add for instance to the above lists words containing difficult diphthongs, as *cuota*, *deuda*, *inicuo*, or certain triphthongs as *buey*, *iréis*, etc.

But the dictation of isolated words is of much less value to ear training than the dictation of words as they stand in a group surrounded by other sounds which react variously upon each other. One may begin with the smaller groups, such as article plus noun, preposition plus noun, as, *los ratones*; *sin ojos*; *con gravedad*; *lo coloco*; and gradually increase to the longer groups, *el de la gorra verde*; *me lo dijo de broma*; *no se nos acerca*; *¿qué día es hoy?*; *yo soy así*; *un buen vaso*, and the like, seldom if ever consenting to repeat other than the whole phonetic group, always examining the written exercise of the class and accounting for the various spellings found in each paper. As the class progresses a short anecdote may be dictated group by group and not word by word. Example:

En Zaragoza / pedía un mendigo una peseta / a una mujer que iba por la calle // Negóse la mujer a darle tal limosna, / y él dijo: / Por esa falta de caridad / se ve uno precisado a trabajar.

To enlarge the active vocabulary. The student should be encouraged to make a conscious effort to enrich his fund of words, and to this end the study of synonyms and antonyms, derivatives, compounds, cognates, and similar words is of great value. Definitions or explanations in Spanish of certain words also furthers this end, and in order to facilitate this part of the work the student is required to prepare out of the text a number of useful words which he should be able to define or explain or use intelligently in an original sentence, availing himself of an all-Spanish dictionary, such as the *Campano Ilustrado*, *El Pequeño Larousse*, Calleja's *Diccionario de bolsillo*. The results accomplished by the intelligent use at home of the unilingual dictionary are very gratifying. Let the word which occurs in the text be *acontecer*; we study the synonyms for this word, such as *acaecer*, *suced*, *pasar*, *ocurrir*, and the nouns *acontecimiento*, *sucedimiento*, *ocurrencia*, etc.; if we meet a word like *arboleda*, it will be defined as *un lugar poblado de árboles*, *un bosque*, *una selva*, etc. It goes without saying that the definitions are often inexact, even amusing, nevertheless the student is constantly encouraged to express the unknown in terms of what he knows. Not very long ago a student was puzzled by the word *cola* found in the text. "*No, señor, no sé lo que quiere decir*" he muttered, but one of his classmates begged to explain, "*Es la parte sur de un caballo que corre hacia el norte.*" Inexact, perhaps, but very graphic. In certain cases a student may show his understanding of a word merely by using it correctly in an original sentence, and this is often resorted to when synonyms and antonyms and definitions are out of the question. Thus the word in question was made clear by another student employing it in the following sentence: "*El perro movía la cola cuando su amo llegaba.*" Another said, "*El caballo se espantaba las moscas con la cola.*"

Study of idioms. The same process above outlined is extended to the study of idioms. One page of the text is more than sufficient for an intensive study. Such expressions as *me da lo mismo*; *no lo echó de ver*; *no dió con lo que buscaba*; etc., are explained respectively as, *me es indiferente*, *no lo notó*, *no halló lo que buscaba*, etc. The most common idioms with *dar* and *echar* are also here passed in review and explained in easier or simpler words, and very special emphasis is placed on the use of the correct preposition.

A word or two may now be added regarding the texts that have been found to be most suitable, and the actual arrangement or distribution of the work, assuming that the class meets four times a week.

In the early stages of the course a very simple text such as Harrison's *Intermediate Spanish Reader*, Giese's *Spanish Anecdotes*, or Hill's *Spanish Tales for Beginners* is used, and the recitation hour is divided as follows: fifteen minutes of dictation, progressing gradually as suggested above; fifteen minutes devoted to the study of words and idioms encountered in the text; fifteen minutes devoted to a questionnaire on the text, and what is left of the hour is spent in explaining questions of grammar or in reading the lesson for the next day. The second day of the week the students are required to recite from memory the anecdote read and analyzed the day before, availing themselves of the synonyms and idioms studied and using exclusively indirect discourse in telling the anecdote. Care is exercised to use the idiom or expression farthest from the English, even if a literal translation should happen to be idiomatic. Thus, out of the three possible constructions with the verb *olvidar*, the impersonal reflexive is preferred, *se nos olvidó hacerlo*, rather than *olvidamos hacerlo*, and in a dialogue in a store the customer will say *me quedo con esta*, rather than *tomo esta*. As the term progresses, the procedure is somewhat varied as follows: the first day of the week, a two or three page story is read, striking words elucidated by the methods mentioned above, the idiomatic constructions analyzed and commented upon, and certain grammatical points explained, such as the use of *ser* and *estar*, of the imperfect and the preterite, of the prepositions, especially *para* and *por*, and a reason asked for every case of subjunctive found in the text. Dictation gradually disappears from the program after the first four or five weeks. The pupil need not write down as often as before what is read to him, and much of this is due probably to his getting accustomed to the instructor's voice. The second day the story with all its trifling details is given progressively by the students, not with the very words of the text and seldom with a direct quotation. On the third day each student brings to the class in writing a short anecdote or *chascarrillo*, either original with him or perhaps taken from sources which will be mentioned below. While the student

hands in for correction his anecdote, analyzed as has been already explained, he is, however, expected to memorize it and recite it before the class. On the fourth day the instructor discusses current events with the class, basing the discussion largely on *La Prensa*, a Spanish daily published in New York. The above program is adhered to in substance throughout the last six weeks of the course.

It may be well to mention in conclusion, some of the texts which, because of their practical vocabulary, may be very useful in conducting a class in Spanish conversation: Harrison's *Intermediate Spanish Reader* (Ginn & Co.) is very useful for the first few weeks of the course on account of its short, interesting selections accompanied by questions, the text not being unduly simplified; Giese's *Spanish Anecdotes* (Heath & Co.) will furnish the student with material that he can easily assimilate and recite from memory in class; Hill's *Spanish Tales for Beginners* (Holt & Co.) offers longer selections which can be used in the second half of the course, and includes some easy poetry which the student may either memorize or paraphrase and comment upon; *El Panorama* (Parker School Press, Chicago) and *La Prensa* (New York City), especially the Thursday and Monday issues of the latter, have interesting material for conversation; Espinosa's *Elementary Spanish Reader* (Sanborn & Co.) contains very well chosen folk lore selections and an intelligent questionnaire, and the several volumes of *El folk lore español* make excellent outside reading for the enthusiastic student.

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